

WASHINGTON, D.C. Although he considers it a seriously flawed measure, U.S. Representative Sanford Bishop says he voted for the House bill to increase military and reconstruction funding in Iraq and Afghanistan by \$87 billion because it addresses critical needs of U.S. troops in harms way.

The U.S. House and Senate passed separate versions of the supplemental appropriations bill Friday (10/17) for post-war operations in the two devastated countries. A joint conference committee was then formed to work out a compromise. The panel was expected to try to present a compromise to the two houses of Congress as quickly as possible.

Georgia's Second District Congressman supported amendments to fix those aspects of the bill that he believes are broken, but all were turned down by a majority of the House members.

First, Representative Bishop objected to funding the entire \$87 billion with borrowed money, making a projected record federal budget deficit substantially worse and putting economic recovery in greater jeopardy. Instead, he proposed to pay for the spending package by deferring scheduled tax cuts for the top 1 percent of America's income earners; converting the reconstruction aid, or part of it, to loans that Iraq could repay in the future from its vast oil reserves, and by scaling back the reconstruction aid to essential projects.

Second, he voiced concern the bill would provide billions of dollars to provide roads, schools, hospitals and other infrastructure needs in Iraq and Afghanistan above and beyond war damages, while the federal government is failing to adequately address many of the same infrastructure deficiencies in the U.S. Pointing out that the bill includes \$493 million to modernize Iraqi medical clinics, he said, "we've got community health centers, community hospitals, and veterans facilities in our area of Georgia that have desperate needs and even face closure for lack of funding."

The Congressman supported efforts to separate consideration of the military and reconstruction portions of the appropriations bill in order to modify the reconstruction spending. But the House Rules Committee did not approve the proposal.

Noting that the Senate voted in its version of the bill to convert half of the money earmarked for reconstruction needs from grants to loans, the Georgia lawmaker said he was hopeful a more responsible compromise would eventually pass.

Representative Bishop made the following statement:

"Mr. Speaker, I'm proud to represent the Second Congressional District of Georgia, which is home to several major military installations and where military retirees and veterans make up a big percentage of the population. At last count, 11,248 active duty, Reserve and National Guard personnel from Georgia bases are serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. A total of 149 Georgia-based soldiers have been wounded in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, and 49 have been killed in action-49 brave Americans.

"Like virtually everyone who lives in my area of southwest Georgia, I believe it would be an

unconscionable dereliction of duty if we failed to provide for the essential needs of our troops we have sent into harms way. In spite of the strong objections many of us have about the bill's flaws, we cannot deny funding for such things as safe drinking water, which many soldiers lack; body armor and other equipment essential to the safety and success of our troops; and housing and other basic living needs.

"We've learned many of the troops serving in Iraq have never been issued the Kevlar flak jacket inserts, or body armor, and some have spent up to \$650 out of their own pockets to purchase this updated protective gear. We're told our troops have gone without other critical equipment, such as portable jammers to block the radio signals used to detonate remote control bombs-the same bombs we continually hear about, day in and day out, in attacks that are wounding and killing our soldiers.

"Today, we have an opportunity to correct these troubling deficiencies. And we must not fail.

"At the same time, people in the Second District are also concerned about the extreme federal deficit, the shortcomings in our own infrastructure, and the burden this added spending imposes on taxpayers. I, too, am concerned when Congress could avoid a bigger deficit by deferring tax cuts just for the wealthiest 1 percent of our citizens, and when U.S. taxpayers are stuck with the entire cost of Iraqi reconstruction even though Iraq is capable of eventually paying for its infrastructure upgrades from its vast oil reserves, the second largest in the world.

"It's an affront to the people I represent to spend millions of dollars for roads, schools, hospitals and economic development initiatives in Iraq while these same needs are drastically under funded in the U.S.; to provide high-speed internet access to the people of Iraq while widespread areas of the U.S., including areas of the Second District, are denied the same access; to provide millions of dollars to train unemployed Iraqi workers while U.S. job training programs are cut.

"I'm not against helping Iraq rebuild. I support efforts to secure Iraq's borders, to train Iraq's security forces, to restore Iraq's water, sanitation, electricity and other utility services, to restore Iraq's transportation and oil production capability, and to help provide the Iraqi people educational and employment opportunities.

"But I'm concerned when we unnecessarily pay for these needs with borrowed money, when we fund non-essential reconstruction projects as well as essential ones, when we shortchange the needs of our own communities, and when our international partners have not stepped up to the plate to contribute their fair share of the reconstruction costs.

"Mr. Speaker, I support our troops and the funding they must have, while I continue to look to the Administration to present a clear and fiscally responsible plan that makes it possible for our service men and women to carry out their mission as safely and effectively as possible and to bring stability and democracy to the suffering people of Iraq and Afghanistan."